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Ladybirds Moving Indoors

Seen any spotted beetles in the house yet? Every fall for the past few years we hear local residents' concerns about ladybugs that have moved indoors. Yes, it is happening in some cases, but these are not your typical ladybugs. *Harmonia axyridis*, the multicolored Asian ladybird, is an introduced beneficial species from Asia. It has colonized most of north America, including Florida.

As a beneficial insect it is quite effective feeding on aphids, mites, scales and moth eggs. It is commonly found during the summer and fall feeding on crapemyrtle aphids whenever they occur.

Unfortunately, these ladybirds have a peculiar habit of overwintering en masse inside buildings. In north Florida this phenomena can occur anytime from November to January. They are simply looking for a place to overwinter. When this happens, it can be very annoying. It is not uncommon to have 10 to 20 thousand beetles in a single dwelling.

One entomologist has recorded as many as 100 thousand of these insects in a single home. Such high numbers as this can result in soiled furnishings. They also release a foul smelling defensive secretion when disturbed.

In Asia, the beetles overwinter naturally in rocky outcrops on the sides of mountains. In Florida they are attracted to light colored buildings that face south to west. They usually enter through cracks and crevasses around windows, doors and other structural parts.

This species often returns to the same dwellings every year. Anyone with a history of ladybugs in the house should take preventative measures now. Make sure that pathways of entry are closed. Cracks around windows, doors and roofs should be caulked.

This is important for both energy conservation as well as excluding other urban insect pests such as cockroaches and ants. Once the ladybirds are inside the house they can be removed with a vacuum cleaner.

Here, we as gardeners have a mixed blessing. This species of ladybird is an effective beneficial insect in the landscape, yet they like to spend the winter indoors with us.

Dr. Russ Mizell, a University of Florida entomologist, has been developing a trap to collect the insects before they enter dwellings. He hopes to have a prototype completed by next season. I will keep you informed of the progress.

Question of the Week: I have enjoyed a beautiful bed of caladiums this summer. Now what do I do? Should I dig the bulbs and store them, or leave them in the ground?

Answer: Locally, caladium tubers are handled both ways. Being tropical plants, the tubers of caladiums are very sensitive to cold temperatures. Gardeners with well drained beds that are in a warm, protected location sometimes leave them in the ground through the winter. On the other hand, cold wet bed conditions result in rotted tubers.

In most cases, it is probably best to dig and store the tubers. Dig them as soon as the above ground portions have begun to dry down. Clean the tubers and store them one layer deep in a well ventilated place. The ideal storage temperature is approximately 70 degrees F. Warmer or cooler temperatures during storage can result in reduced vigor.